

Lesbian feminism

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As the four JUMP CUT men who worked most closely with the Lesbians and Film Special Section collective, we were invited by the women to discuss what we learned in the process. We responded eagerly and began meeting to discuss what we would write. Many months, meetings, memos, and draft versions later, we've realized just how difficult it is for four straight men to discuss issues of sexual politics. At the same time, we were convinced that we have learned, changed, and grown from our association with the Special Section collective.

LESSONS FROM EXPERIENCE

First of all, we've become much more conscious of our relation to lesbian and feminist issues. We see more clearly our own activity and JUMP CUT as a changing process which includes our own efforts to deal with our sexism. By that we mean not only changing the "thoughts in our heads" but also our patterns of unspoken assumptions and behavior. We realize that in mixed groups as straight men we've been able to rely on women to bring up these issues. Thus we have not had to think about lesbian and feminist issues in an active, consistent way. Writing the editorial has pushed us to think a lot more and clarify our thinking.

In addition to thinking seriously about the issues of lesbian feminism and the nature of the support we might contribute, the lesbian special section project has had repercussions on the way that we work as a group. In working with lesbian feminists, we've found a different environment than one where heterosexuality is the norm. In the presence of lesbian feminist values, we've had to adjust our behavior and expectations, sometimes radically. It's not always been easy.

Working with lesbian feminists on JUMP CUT has also forced us to confront how power is exercised in a group. Most immediately, we think

it's important to regularly examine, criticize, and change our group interact, so that women can have their feelings and ideas validated without having to spend a lot of effort on raising issues of sexism. Instead of putting the burden for change on women, we think men have to go out of their way to deal with women's criticisms. Men have to actively change their everyday behavior. For instance, the way support is given and received and the way our work is validated in the group is different when working with lesbians than the way such validation usually occurs in a purely heterosexual context. With weakened structures of heterosexuality and male bonding, we are often left on our own in what feels at times to be a powerless state. This is a unique situation for straight men to be dealing with on a regular basis. Rather than rewarding our passive/aggressiveness, this new context supports our ability to struggle with our sexism and to feel comfortable without a power relationship to women.

Outside of JUMP CUT we are often reminded of how much we expect and sometimes demand from all women in heterosexual environments. Working with women-identified women on the terms of their feminism makes men be on their "good behavior." At times we resent that, but it's important to realize that the situation and relations taking place are based on a different set of exchanges and human interactions. In the dominant culture heterosexual women often take on men's problems and psychological states as part of their lives, and that's comforting to men. In working on JUMP CUT the terms have shifted, and we have been forced to realize how many of our assumptions are based on heterosexual norms. The satisfaction that this gives us falls outside of our traditional self-interests as men. We are put in an ideological contradiction that makes us accountable both for our sexism and for any inclination to co-opt, dominate, or dilute feminist thought and action. In accepting feminism men lose power, and the more we accept feminism the more we find out how much power we have to lose. But in attempting to shake off our sexism and patriarchal privilege, we gain strength in struggling against our established ideas of women. Some people say that you can't change voluntarily. That's partly true, but it can be used as an excuse for not trying to change at all. On JUMP CUT we have put ourselves and found ourselves in a new situation that is neither easy to live with nor without conflict. But this is the beginning of positive change in how we think and act.

It's been discomfoting for us as men when the women have asserted the uniqueness of their personal lives without men, that lesbian films differ in ways our aesthetics and politics don't recognize, and that men are not particularly relevant to women's discussions of women's culture. We are forced to listen (for a change!). On one level it's frustrating for men to realize that women as individuals and as a group have an area of knowledge about women's culture which men will not be able to master or become authorities on. For example, any lesbian has a kind of

authority in speaking of a Barbara Hammer film that no man can claim.

On another level, though, we see that fact as productively challenging our ingrained patterns of thought — especially the belief in *mastering* a *body* of knowledge. Sexist metaphor, sexist behavior. We need to develop a new kind of learning. At the same time, we don't think that realizing the uniqueness of women's lives and culture means that feminist ideas, experience, and art is forever Other to us. Working with lesbian feminists has forced us to change our own assumptions.

Unfortunately this was usually discovered when a conflict arose. But as we recognized that cultural, social, and political priorities often differ, we've become more aware of women's culture and how many of its goals and values have not been recognized by the male left, politically or aesthetically. Part of this awareness consists of an amalgam of curiosity, tentativeness, and humility in approaching women's art. We realize that we've learned from women's culture and politics. It has affected our personal lives, our filmmaking and creative work, our relations with men and women. And we're also aware of our own limits in changing our sexism. We don't think we have all the answers, but we do think we're dealing with crucial issues.

To deal with new issues we needed new forms. In first planning the Special Section, everyone agreed the women's collective would function autonomously as an editorial group making its decisions by consensus. The rest of the staff served to offer support and advice when requested. We think the arrangement worked well, guaranteeing autonomy within the general context of a mixed publication which expects men on the staff to deal with feminism as an intellectual and political reality and with sexual politics in staff relations. At the same time, this put men on the staff in a new situation. Rather than actively participating in a major JUMP CUT editorial project, we were outsiders, balancing between not wanting to be totally aloof from a very exciting project and not wanting to butt in where we were not welcome. At times we were put in a kind of voyeuristic position, seeing differences and sometimes conflicts in the Special Section collective, but feeling that we could not intervene. We've also seen that feminist thought challenges old ways of being men that we ourselves are critical of and wish to change.

LESSONS FROM ANALYSIS

Perhaps that is why we put so much energy into writing this editorial. We wanted to show our good intentions and support. We probably also wanted some kind of approval for having good intentions to make up for the loss of validation built into traditional male-female relations. Faced with changing situations, we change too, but not without further contradiction. We became more conscious of tending to each other's emotions and putting energy into our relations with each other. Does this relieve women of tending to us? Does it reproduce the same old

aspects of male bonding? To what extent are these just heterosexual dilemmas that we reproduce unthinkingly? We've been pushed to discuss these issues, read more widely, try to write an analysis, hear many pointed critiques of our efforts. We've revised, rethought, and revised some more.

Why so much effort, someone might ask. Isn't there something incongruous, if not ludicrous, about men supporting lesbians? Probably. But from the start JUMP CUT has rested on some fundamental assumptions which include the understanding that in North America today, class, race, and sexual oppression are fundamentally interconnected and there is no one single issue, group, or political line that is privileged above all others. In contrast to those who despair at the apparent great fragmentation of forces for progressive change, we see a diversity that is a creative response to a historically new and challenging situation.

Furthermore, as radical cultural workers we share with many feminists the deep conviction that cultural work is important in its own right. Not that culture is more important than other things. Not that art alone will make the revolution. But we think cultural struggle is an essential part of changing capitalist patriarchy. Cultural workers are not just the people you call when you need posters and publicity or a film to draw a crowd or raise funds. Culture is part of the entire society we need to transform to human ends. In this context, our interest in lesbian feminism takes on political meaning.

We support the lesbian feminist movement in all its rich diversity. Lesbian feminism has been, now is, and will continue to be a vital part of building a movement for revolutionary social and political change in North America and in defining the goals, strategy, and tactics of those struggles. As cultural workers we support lesbians who are doing radical cultural work — within the lesbian community, within the feminist movement, alongside the gay male movement, and in the left at large.

As left men we call on other men to recognize the strength of lesbian feminism. First, in the contribution of lesbians to an analysis of sexism and heterosexism which is crucial to every proposal for radical change and action. Second, for the key organizing work that lesbians have done both in building a strong lesbian community and in their contributions to the broader feminist and gay movements. And third, as an autonomous and diversified movement which has increasingly become politically powerful and active.

Like all mass-based politics, the lesbian movement contains an immense range of thought, opinion, and analysis — a diversity which ensures a climate of active discussion of issues and organizing. Emerging from an older tradition of lesbian struggles for civil rights and cultural identification, and decisively shaped by the concomitant emergence of

new women's struggles, the lesbian movement today must be recognized as a strong force combating sexist oppression and exploitation.

The fundamental political point that lesbian feminism raises for the entire spectrum of progressive politics in North America is the nature of sexism and therefore the struggle against it.

Specifically it challenges taken-for-granted assumptions about how and why men and women relate, the patterns and structures which shape such relations, as well as the ways that women interrelate. Lesbians are living proof that women can get along just fine without being defined in relation to men. Thus they define the issue of sexual politics in terms of recognizing women as autonomous beings who will or will not enter into relations with men as they choose, rather than positing the issue in terms of seeking a fictitious fifty-fifty equality within a relationship. This means that men must think differently about lesbians and all women. We want to emphasize that women choosing to love women is a positive choice. It is false to conceive of lesbian love as principally a rejection of men. Lesbian relations are decisions for being with women. It is weird phallocentrism for men to believe that the only or major reason women would love other women was because they hated men.

The institutions of heterosexuality and capitalism shape women's daily lives and so it is never possible to simply opt out of the dominant culture. However, many lesbians have actively refused to accept the inevitability of their oppression by entering into a struggle against the patriarchal order.

It should be clear in 1981 that lesbians' struggle against heterosexism has been successful on a number of fronts. In the face of both oppression and ridicule, lesbians have established the beginnings of a real community of women. Lesbian feminists have repeatedly challenged sexist behavior and thinking, argued for new and broader definitions of what "politics" are, created alternatives to oppressive ways of working together, and had a strong vision of the power of women working together. This has been especially true in lesbian cultural works: in literature, criticism, and journalism, in the visual arts, in theater and performance arts, in music, and increasingly in video and film.

For example, the strong and varied lesbian press covering news, politics, and art has played a large role in building and strengthening networks of lesbian political and cultural groups and has given lesbians the base of intellectual support for establishing a strong presence in other feminist and mixed political coalitions. Women's music has been an especially productive area for lesbian leadership. The current loose U.S. network of festivals, concerts, and coffeehouses, record making and distribution, musicians and audiences provides a model for everyone who hopes we can construct strong affirmative alternatives to the

dominant patriarchal and capitalist culture industry. Furthermore, lesbians have established an enthusiastic and appreciative audience for all feminist cultural work, giving it a core of basic ongoing support and in turn shaping its development by their presence.

The community of women is the most tangible evidence of a lesbian movement. At the same time, it is imperative for men to realize that when lesbians speak of a community of women, the reference is not only to alternative institutions of women's art, culture, and politics but to a radically new way for women to think of themselves and their relationships to other women. Many lesbians speak of this in terms of the woman-identified woman, an orientation which encourages women to begin developing ties and identifications with the needs and goals of their sisters and simultaneously away from male definitions of what female behavior and sisterhood should be. They argue that heterosexism seems on the surface to be a choice of sex preference, but in effect it functions as an institution and ideology which oppresses and stifles. The lesbian critique of patriarchy is a political critique. By striving to understand the institutional nature of heterosexism, the issue of lesbian liberation quickly branches out beyond the demand for lesbian civil rights.

Thus the political critique of heterosexism and the concept of the woman-identified woman ensure that lesbians cannot in the long run be accepted by men only to then be marginalized, since a successful spread of lesbian feminist thinking and practice will speak to all women and men in society. Because a lesbian feminist perspective offers such a strong image of what women's relations and lives could become, men on the left need to support the community of women as a vital part of progressive change. But we find most heterosexual left men reproduce the dominant sexism in their ignorance and caricatures of and dogmatism about lesbian feminism. Without a doubt, the lesbian feminist movement has made more of an effort to understand and respond to issues of class and race than the straight left has made to understand and deal with lesbian feminism. The actual experience of lesbian feminists challenges rigid thinking. Some lesbian feminists start from premises which are biological determinist, spiritualist, or idealist, and which other women regard with suspicion because arguments based on those same premises have been used to keep women down. Nonetheless, lesbians who believe that women have a special relation to nature often become actively involved in health, reproductive rights, violence, and anti-nuke and environmental work. In these efforts they have entered into institutional struggles that deal with new complex issues involving race and class, capitalism and state institutions. We think it's time for the straight left, many of whose views on sexuality and personal life seem to fall into obtuse puritanism, unscientific nonsense, or hipster liberalism, to stop distorting or claiming ignorance about the political work of lesbians. Its time to learn and it's time to take some

initiative.

We urge straight men on the left to begin confronting men about their sexism and homophobia, both in mixed groups and in all male encounters. Of course, criticizing as a strategy has to take different forms and different situations require different tactics. Criticism of men's sexism is the most appropriate and solid support which men can give to lesbians. Primarily, it takes some of the burden off women to be constantly fighting these issues and hopefully saves women's energy for more fruitful endeavors. It's a concrete example of support without dictating to women how they should relate to each other. Men must make the effort to confront those institutions and individuals that stifle women from any choice about their lives and relationships.

The male advocate of feminist issues must be careful. There can be a fine line between men taking up the issues of feminism as support for women, and men presuming to speak for women, and simply dominating things in a new way. What else can men do? Overcome their own ignorance of lesbian culture and ideas. Support lesbians who are out in their battles against discrimination and their efforts to produce women's culture. Encourage all women to develop ties with other women. Create an atmosphere in which lesbians can work and where lesbian issues can be openly raised. Support the struggles of gay men and develop relations with other men which are emotionally supportive and noncompetitive.

Lesbian feminists are redefining the nature of political organizing in their insistence that people counteract old ways of thinking and acting. This will eventually have a great influence on the practice of all political work. Lesbians are saying that political activity has to be different from the way the male-dominated left has conceived it, particularly in relations between men and women but also in broadening the range of issues and approaches to be engaged. As it continues to grow and develop in struggling against sexist biases and practices of our time, lesbian feminism will strengthen all forces working for revolutionary change.